

Congresswoman Betty McCollum
Remarks to the Committee on Education Funding
September 17, 2008

Thank you to Hilary Goldman and the Committee on Education Funding for inviting me to be here today.

It's an honor to be with a group of people who believe as I do that there is no more important investment we can make than in the education of our children.

Your work is particularly effective because of this large coalition.

When we can speak in simple terms, in a single voice we can show clearly that it is critical to our children, families, communities, economy and global status that we have strong public schools, colleges, universities and opportunities for job training.

Access to quality education is the great equalizer.

I did not grow up thinking that I would be a member of Congress.

But the public schools in South St. Paul, MN gave me the tools I needed to think critically and to become a lifelong learner.

I was then able to afford the time at community college and later, with the help of grants, the College of St. Catherine's.

As a high school substitute I had the opportunity to see – well first, how challenging teenagers can be first thing in the morning – but more importantly how learning something new can change a student's outlook.

As a member of Congress, I had the opportunity to serve on the Education and Workforce committee for my first 3 terms.

During my service on that committee – Congress passed No Child Left Behind.

I was the only committee Democrat to oppose No Child Left Behind and I am still proud of that vote.

One of the main reasons I opposed the bill was that I just flat out didn't believe that the dollars were going to follow the mandates.

I had been a part of the collaborative work done at the state level in Minnesota to improve education outcomes. Our work included educators, the business community administrators, parents and legislators.

And what I learned is that real education reform –improving outcomes for students – is costly. And it can't be done with just a test.

To date, NCLB has been underfunded by \$85 billion

That, combined with chronically under-funded IDEA, has school districts in my state and I'm sure many others having to back to the voters with levy requests year after year.

Now – particularly with the economy in the state it's in—this is not a long term solution.

I am now proud to serve on the Appropriations Committee – and the subcommittee that funds education.

Chairman Obey made it very clear to us this year that while we cannot repair the damage of the last 8 years quickly – we need to start thinking differently.

What is the cost of NOT providing our children a quality education?

What is the cost of NOT allowing access to higher education?

What is the cost of NOT investing in early education?

This year's subcommittee mark provides for small but significant increases in education funding.

I'm sure you're all as frustrated as we are with the process.

However, education funding is one of the reasons we have not passed a bill.

The President proposed a budget that was wholly inadequate in meeting the needs of schools, educators, and students.

And he refused to negotiate.

Frankly, we would rather wait and see if the next President is willing to make education a priority.

We need your help to convince our colleagues of the urgency in providing adequate funding for education

And that starts with elections.

You should absolutely ask anyone who asks for your vote or your money or your help – what is his or her position on education funding?

Will he or she be a champion on this issue?

What about early education?

Everyone talks about it – we've seen the data showing the incredible rate of return on investment.

Will your candidate make funding these efforts a priority? And how will we pay for it?

Higher education has been a high priority for the 110th Congress.

We passed the College Cost Reduction Act in 2007 which was the biggest investment in higher education since the GI bill.

We have also reauthorized the Higher Education Act – something that was long overdue.

I was pleased to work with Mr. Tierney in including a Maintenance of Effort provision in that bill.

I know this was controversial but it simply says that states also have a responsibility to fund higher education

and that higher education funding should not be the bank every time there is a state deficit.

Either at the state or federal level – does your candidate support access to higher education for everyone?

Unfortunately, it seems that too often education funding does not rise to the top in political debates or discussions.

We need to change that.

Education is critical to our future. Why? Because education leads to the innovation that develops the products and services of tomorrow.

When I visited medical device manufactures in my district this past summer, their number one issue was difficulty in recruiting skilled workers.

They want to be more involved in education.

In response, I am authoring legislation, the ASPIRE Act,

to create a grant program to fund after school programs for middle and high school students.

The purpose is to improve drop out prevention efforts and increase our skilled workforce by linking core academics with career activities.

Local school districts will partner with colleges and universities, businesses, career and technical organizations, tribal organizations or non-profits to offer a program that improves student outcomes and interest in high demand careers.

It is my intention that this bill will be a part of the debate when we resume consideration of reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the next Congress.

I hope you will all review the bill – I would love to have your help.

Education is the cornerstone of American democracy.
If we are to continue have a strong and free democracy,
it is in everyone's best interest to invest in our citizens.

Collectively we have a lot of work to do to adequately fund all levels of education.
Its going to take some tough choices by the next President and Congress, but in order to
jumpstart an economic recovery we need to invest in our future.

I want to thank the public school teachers, librarians, counselors, staff and college and
university faculty that gave me the opportunities that I have had.

Thank you for inviting me here today
and for all your work on behalf of students and families.